

Online Research @ Cardiff

This is an Open Access document downloaded from ORCA, Cardiff University's institutional repository: <https://orca.cardiff.ac.uk/id/eprint/97783/>

This is the author's version of a work that was submitted to / accepted for publication.

Citation for final published version:

Mroz, Daniel 2017. Taolu: credibility and decipherability in the practice of Chinese martial movement. *Martial Arts Studies* 3 , pp. 38-49.
10.18573/j.2017.10094 file

Publishers page: <http://dx.doi.org/10.18573/j.2017.10094>
<<http://dx.doi.org/10.18573/j.2017.10094>>

Please note:

Changes made as a result of publishing processes such as copy-editing, formatting and page numbers may not be reflected in this version. For the definitive version of this publication, please refer to the published source. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite this paper.

This version is being made available in accordance with publisher policies.

See

<http://orca.cf.ac.uk/policies.html> for usage policies. Copyright and moral rights for publications made available in ORCA are retained by the copyright holders.



CONTRIBUTOR

Daniel Mroz is a theatre director, university professor and student of the martial arts. His recent performances have been presented at the Canada Dance Festival and the Événement Zones Théâtrales. The Dancing Word, his book on how to use the Chinese martial arts in the practice of contemporary theatre, is published by Brills. He studies martial arts with Chen Zhonghua and studied acting and directing with Richard Fowler. He holds a Doctorat en études et pratiques des arts from the Université du Québec à Montréal. He is Associate Professor in the Department of Theatre at the University of Ottawa where he teaches acting and directing.

This paper was first presented as a keynote address at the July 2016 Martial Arts Studies Conference at Cardiff University, U.K.

TAOLU

CREDIBILITY AND DECIPHERABILITY IN THE PRACTICE OF CHINESE MARTIAL MOVEMENT

DANIEL MROZ

DOI

10.18573/j.2017.10094

KEYWORDS

Taolu, interpretation, credibility, decipherability, Chinese Martial Arts

CITATION

Mroz, Daniel. 2017. 'Taolu: Credibility and Decipherability in the Practice of Chinese Martial Movement', *Martial Arts Studies* 3, 38-50.

ABSTRACT

The practice of taolu (taolu, tà lù, 套路), the prearranged movement patterns of the Chinese martial arts, has been explained in fantastically diverse ways spanning a range of interpretations from the essential and functional to the narrative, theatrical and religious. Rather than trying to find a universal reason for the practice of taolu, this paper proposes to look at the idea of prearranged movement patterns through the lens of credibility and decipherability. These twin concepts, borrowed from the Great Reform movement in 20th century theatre practice, helpfully embrace both the criteria by which the performance of taolu is usually judged and also the deficiencies in our contemporary understanding of reasons behind this palimpsestic training method. As conceptual tools, credibility and decipherability also offer us insight into how the practice of prearranged martial movement patterns is presented and interpreted as a personal and phenomenological experience of embodied practice. This paper hopes to pragmatically present new perspectives from which the practice of taolu can be understood.

I would like to invite you to take part in a thought experiment with me. I would like to provisionally remove all but the most pragmatic definition of *taolu* (tao4lu4, tàò lù, 套路). Yes, they are the prearranged movement patterns found in the Chinese martial arts; no, we're not sure what they are for or how to look at them. I'd like to temporarily propose that *taolu* are *xuan* (xuan2, 玄), in the Orthodox Daoist sense, meaning 'dark; profoundly mysterious'. This is not a prosaic mystery that will eventually be solved; it is an ultimate mystery, a feature of our experience that will remain impenetrable. I hope that if we consider *taolu* from this perspective it will relieve us of the preferences, habits and received wisdom with which we usually understand them. Likewise, should we seem to actually explain *taolu* in the course of our deliberations, their status as *xuan* will prevent us from succumbing to the temptation of merely explaining them away.

My reason for provisionally declaring the most visible and characteristic aspect of Chinese martial arts to be a mystery comes from my own experience. Since 1993 I've practiced several Chinese martial arts, principally Siu Lum Hung Sing Choy Li Fut kuen and the Practical Method (or Shiyong Quanfa) of the Chen style of taijiquan. Looking back over two decades of learning, I see that I take *taolu* for granted at every level of my engagement with gongfu. As a student, teacher and scholar I have unquestioningly behaved as though *taolu* are the alembic where the ideal 'what and how' of Chinese martial movement is synthesized, made manifest, refined, presented and refined again. Taking *taolu* for granted might be a perfectly adequate stance for practicing, teaching and theorizing, but realizing my habit, I ask myself: 'What do I think about when I think about *taolu*?'

While the practice is ubiquitous there is amazing diversity in its manifestations and there is very little real consensus as to its purpose. British fighter Steve Morris expressed his frustration with Chinese martial arts training in a way that sums up the situation nicely:

Attempting to clearly differentiate within the esoteric boxing forms of Fujian, let alone those of all of China, what is combative from that which has its origins in shaman, Taoist, Hindu/Buddhist magico-religious practices, mudra (i.e., the depicting of a story, emotion or action), secret society symbolism, zoomorphic display, Chi Kung gymnastics, the theatre, aesthetics or simply a fanciful display, would prove difficult enough for someone raised in the regional cultures in which these forms originated, let alone for a country boy from Penley 'Dingles', North Wales!

[Morris 2003]

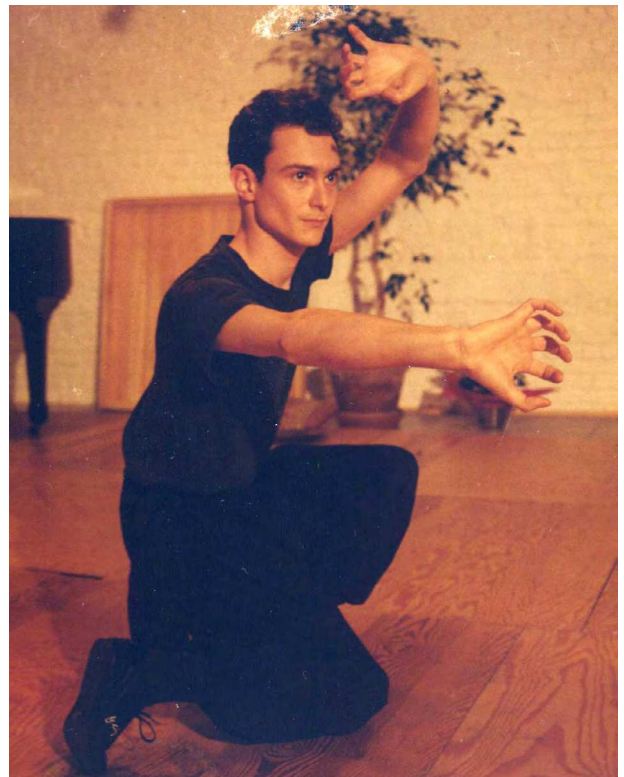


Figure 1. Author performing Choy Li Fut kuen's Qi Long Ma movement in Brussels, Belgium in 1995. Photo by Satyanarayanan Nair.



Figure 2. Author performing Chen taijiquan's You Cha Jiao movement in Ottawa, Canada in 2009. Photo by Laura Astwood.

While I think Morris is engaging in a little false modesty at the end there, given how intelligent and able he is, he has made a thorough if informal list of ingredients the imagined combination of which does indeed suggest baffling complexity. But, in spite of this, we practitioners continue to entertain opinions – nay wholehearted convictions – about taolu. How are we thinking about them?

To begin to answer I'd like to turn to an important branch of 20th century theatre practice called The Great Reform. The Great Reform, or *Wielka Reforma*, is a term invented by Leon Schiller, a Polish theatre director working between the two world wars. It refers to the early 20th century pioneers of theatre who developed modernism and the art of the director. Due to fascism, communism and the world wars, the continuity of this work was lost to Western Europe, the UK and North America but was preserved in Eastern Europe where it was developed by later generations of directors and creators [Schino 2009: 192, 261]. The most well-known artist associated with the Great Reform is Konstantin Stanislavsky (née Alexeyev), the Russian actor and theatre director who created numerous approaches to actor training during his lifetime and who left an indelible stamp on the aesthetics of both the Eastern European and the Anglo-American theatre traditions.

My engagement with the Great Reform, like my relationship with Chinese martial arts, came first as a practitioner. I learned to create theatre in one of the many branches of that lineage of artists: a Russian actor named Yuri Zavadsky was taught by Stanislavsky and worked with two of his principal students, Vsevolod Meyerhold and Evgeny Vakhtangov. Zavadsky in turn taught a Polish director named Jerzy Grotowski, who taught an Italian director named Eugenio Barba.

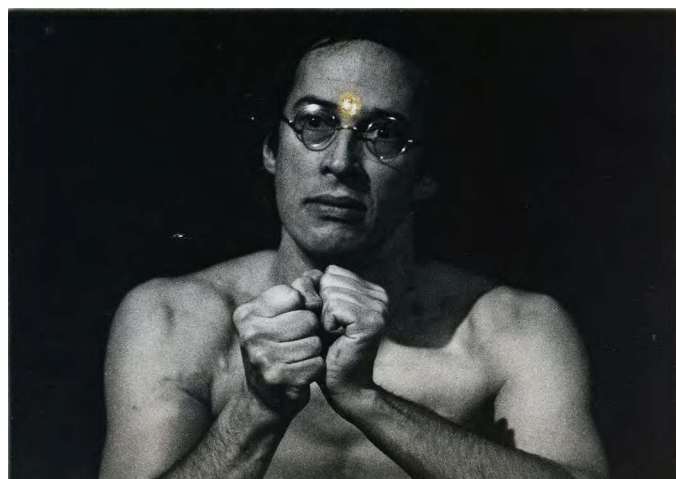


Figure 3: Richard Fowler (ca. 1980) in his solo theatre piece *Wait for the Dawn*. Photo by Jan Ruzs.

Canadian actor and director Richard Fowler studied under and then worked with both Grotowski and Barba before returning to Canada, where I became his student.

Like the Chinese martial arts, transmission in the Great Reform is based on personal apprenticeship and on sustained immersion in an ensemble or family-like group that practices a daily training. While the aesthetics of the Great Reform have diversified considerably over the course of the 20th century, they are principally characterized by the requirement that a theatrical performance be meaningful due to the credibility of the actions of the performers within a metaphorical staging designed by the director.

In his book, which has the 'martial arts studies friendly' title of *Theatre and Boxing: The Actor Who Flies*, Franco Ruffini sets up a pragmatic binary derived from the writings of Stanislavsky. We interpret theatrical performances along the two axes of credibility and decipherability. Decipherability asks: 'What does it mean?' Credibility asks: 'Was it performed in a way I respond to?' Ruffini's thesis is that, under the aegis of the Great Reform, acting in the European art theatre of the 20th century switched from emphasizing decipherability to emphasizing credibility [Ruffini 2014].

I'll return to the Great Reform later. Right now, I'd like to consider taolu from the pragmatic perspectives of credibility and decipherability.

If we're not careful when we ask 'What does it mean?' and 'Was it performed in a way I respond to?' then we often wind up evaluating the *authenticity* of the material and the *competence* of the person performing it. Judgments of authenticity and competence are not my concern here. Our criteria for authenticity are most often derived from a jingoistic commitment to the style or styles we know personally and our evaluation of competence usually depends on the range of practitioners we've been able to observe first hand. My objective in introducing decipherability and credibility as tools is not to engage in criticism rendered parochial by the limits of our individual experiences. Rather, I hope to use these two ideas to examine how we identify and parse the component elements of taolu.

I propose that parsing taolu to differentiate their component parts and perceive the relationships between them can be done in two complementary ways, spatiotemporally and culturally. We can examine the actual movements as actions, vectors, trajectories and dynamics. And we can attempt to learn what cultural significance these movements have held.

There are numerous examples of spatiotemporal analysis of taolu in modern and contemporary Chinese sources provided by authors such as Wan Lai Sheng [1927] and Kang Ge Wu [1995]. The specific approach I'd like to focus on today is one that derives the actions of taolu from simple foundational movements.

The first exponent to propose an analysis in terms of foundational movements is Hong Junsheng [1907-1996], a student of Chen Fake [1887-1957] and himself a master of the Chen style of taijiquan. Following the ideas expressed in Chen Xin's 1933 manual, *The Illustrated Explanations of Chen Family Taijiquan*, Hong analyzed the movements of the two principal taolu of the style and determined that every movement was composed of variations on one of two possible circular hand trajectories [see Hong 2006].¹

The 'positive' or *xun* circle (figure 4 below) when performed with the right hand moves in a clockwise direction. The 'negative' or *ni* circle (figure 5 overleaf) when performed with the right hand moves in a counter clockwise direction. While this particular movement is very specific to Hong's Chen style, I feel the positive and negative trajectories he proposes can be used to describe a much wider swath of movements.

Hong is not alone in finding two actions at the centre of his martial movement training. Contemporary Taiwanese martial artist Zhou Baofu (b. 1951) suggests that all gongfu movements are derived from two hand trajectories, which he describes as 'blocking hand', which moves inward, and 'sweeping hand', which moves outward [Zhou 2014: 20:37]. While he expresses them using different words, he is describing the same basic trajectories as Hong.

1 See also Timothy J. Nulty's discussion of these circles in his article in this issue (pages 55-63).

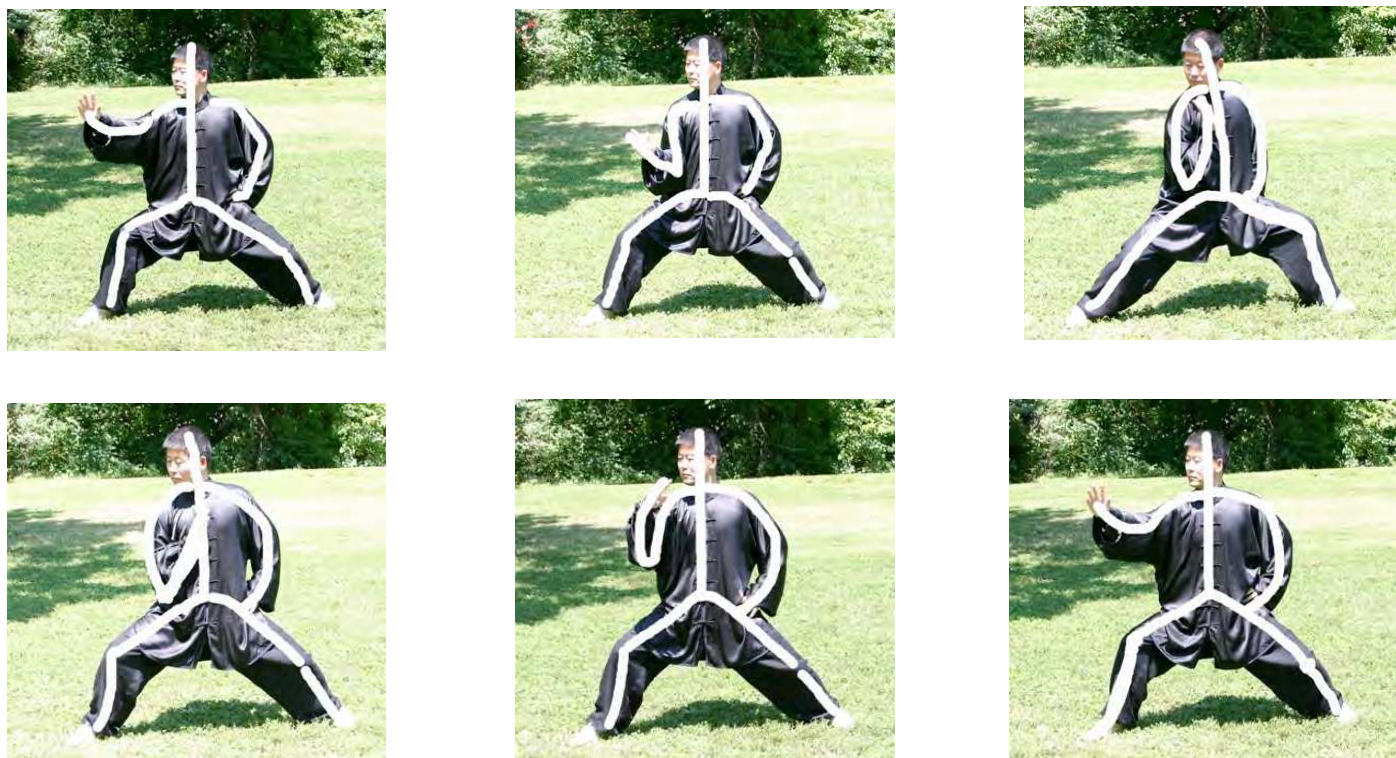
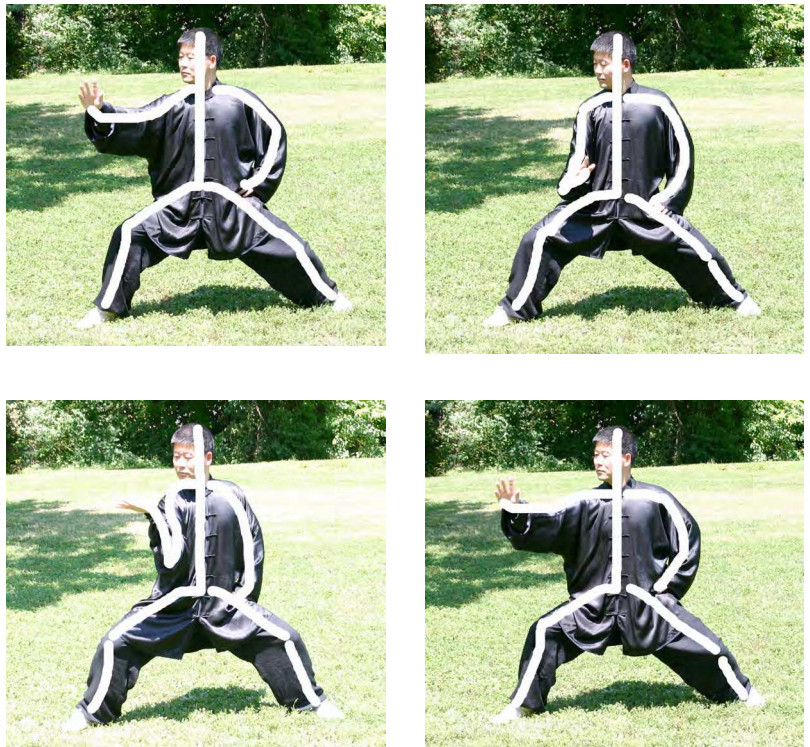


Figure 4: Chen Zhonghua demonstrating the positive circle.
Photos courtesy of Chen Zhonghua.

Figure 5: Chen Zhonghua demonstrating the negative circle.
Photos courtesy of Chen Zhonghua.



Taiwanese choreographer Lin Huaimin is the founder of the renowned Cloud Gate Dance Theatre. He has created a cosmopolitan synthesis of North American modern dance that he learned at the Martha Graham school in the late 1960s with traditional Chinese movement forms. To this end, he has collaborated with gongfu teacher Adam Hsu and Chen taijiquan teacher Xiong Wei. Lin is even more ambitious than Hong and Zhou. He believes that the principal characteristic of all Chinese movement – dance, theatre and martial arts – is the sequential execution of the two circles described by Hong and Zhou in a pattern that is temporally desynchronized. I experienced Lin's ideas and his fundamental movement training in person in October of 2007 when I took a master class with Ms. Lee Ching Chun, the co-artistic director of Cloudgate, at the National Arts Centre of Canada in Ottawa, Canada. This flower-shaped toroid movement (see video 1 opposite) is the basis for all of Lin's work.

Finally, Lu Suosen, a master performer of the martial roles in Beijing Opera and a teacher at the National Academy of Chinese Theatre Arts in Beijing, believes that the movements of his art are derived from the rotation of two desynchronized circles, a movement known as *yun shou* or cloud Hands. Ms. Shijia Jiang, Lu's apprentice, demonstrates

an example (see 1:00 - 1:03, video 2 opposite) of *yun shou* found in the second Xiao Wu Tao, the short fighting set learned by novice Beijing Opera students.

Formally and pragmatically, the idea of deriving all Chinese martial movement from two circular trajectories executed simultaneously, sequentially or in syncopation is compelling. I have found it to be an effective shortcut for learning new taolu and for maintaining old ones.

But, helpful as this is, these are still *a posteriori* formal analyses. There remains a vast distance between relatively simple foundational moves and sophisticated choreographies. We can parse taolu into fundamental spatiotemporal units, but can we build them up from such simple beginnings? To accommodate the complexity of taolu I believe we need to turn to cultural forms. What did movements made up of fundamental spatiotemporal units mean to their creators?

Steve Morris' exasperated list itemizes the cultural activities that I believe are present and represented in taolu: combative movement, theatrical presentation and religious en-action.



Video 1: Flower Series

Click image to activate
(if viewing in latest
Adobe Acrobat Reader)
or watch online at
<https://vimeo.com/193558729>



Video 2: Cloud Hands Series

Click image to activate
(if viewing in latest
Adobe Acrobat Reader)
or watch online at
<https://vimeo.com/195117574>
[1:00-1:03]

Taolu have these characteristics for both intended and circumstantial reasons. They are first and foremost palimpsestic and speak in a mix of archaic and contemporary terms. A little familiarity with Daoist ritual and Chinese theatre, and with the three conflicts that led to the partial erasure of a culture that could recognize these elements – the Taiping Rebellion (1850-1864), the Opera Rebellion (1854-1855) and the Boxer Rebellion (1899-1901) – allows us to imagine an earlier time when the performance of taolu functioned simultaneously as combative training, theatrical entertainment and religious acts of self-consecration and exorcism [Holcombe 1990]. Today, we often lack the interpretive tools to see the vestiges of these elements present in the taolu we train. While we'll never know for sure how taolu were understood prior to the late 19th century, combative, theatrical and religious ideas are formalized in taolu in concrete ways that complement the spatiotemporal ideas we've just explored. Indeed, chances are if you have learned a taolu, then no matter the style, it has some of the following features:

An opening, which could be the up-out/up-in/down-out/down-in *kai zhang* or opening palms common to the Southern Shaolin styles, or the slow parallel rise of the arms in Yang or Wu style taijiquan.

Themes and nodes, or movements that are repeated along different trajectories, such as taijiquan's yun shou or cloud hands or Choy Li Fut kuen's *kwa/sao/chaap*. These punctuate the different sections or phases of the taolu.

A diagrammatic stepping pattern that creates a two-dimensional shape on the floor. These can be derived from religious practice, which was for example the original context of walking the nine points of the luoshu (figure 6), which is used as a training tool in the martial art of baguazhang.

Taolu may also contain *theatrical characters*. Here General Guan Yu enters, strokes his beard, rides his horse and sharpens his glaive in Choy Li Fut's Guan Dao form. The sequence refers to Guan Yu's journey of 1000 miles in the tale of the Three Kingdoms where he 'passed 5 gates and killed 6 generals' (過五關斬六將, *guò wǔ guān, zhǎn liù jiàng*). Presumably, after killing the six generals, he needed to sharpen his glaive! In another example, Daoist immortal Lu Dong Bin appears in the closing movements of the first section of the Wudang Dan Pai Liu Duan sword form.

As they are in fact deities, the appearances of these theatrical characters are also *religious references*. The evocation of deified figures such as Guan Yu and Lu Dong Bin is considered to have an exorcistic and purifying effect in Chinese normative religion [Riley 1997].

4	9	2
3	5	7
8	1	6

Figure 6: The luoshu magic square.



Figure 7: Author demonstrates the shou yin in the Wudang Dan Pai taiji. Photo by Laura Astwood.



Video 3: Guan Dao excerpt

Click image to activate
(if viewing in latest
Adobe Acrobat Reader)
or watch online at
<https://vimeo.com/195125152>

Further religious references can be found in the form of shou yin or mudras, such as the closing movement in the Wudang Dan Pai Xuan Men qigong taijiquan form, *Kan Li Ji Ji* or 'Qi Above and Qi Below Mutually Reinforce Each Other'. Here the shou yin for the fiery heart, which resembles the head of a deer, is placed beneath the open hand that resembles the watery moon (figure 7 opposite).

These examples can easily be perceived 'from the outside'. Some structures, however, are more conceptual. For example, the taolu of Hong Junsheng's Chen style contain a literary/religious reference. The first set, or Yi Lu, has 81 movements and the second, or Er Lu, has 64, which corresponds to the 81 chapters of the Laozi and the 64 chapters of the Zhouyi, both classics of ancient Chinese literature.

I'm confident that this list can be developed substantially, not just by the addition of further elements, but also by the fact that some taolu seem to be defined by the *absence* of these elements. For example, while Choy Li Fut kuen is characterized by long and theatrical taolu, its contemporary, wing chun kuen, has equally structured and sophisticated taolu that appear to be devoid of religious and theatrical elements – or, at least, they are quite hard to spot in contemporary practice.

The selective presence and absence of all of these elements give taolu a rudimentary narrative form. They have clear markers indicating

beginnings, endings, themes and variations. Concrete fighting techniques are introduced, repeated, developed and varied. Religious references appear and theatrical characters are evoked and dismissed. Conceptual meanings and imaginal² actions only known to the performer may also be present.

To sum up, I am proposing two axes for considering decipherability in taolu: spatiotemporal form and cultural form. These axes are pragmatic. We cannot claim absolutely that taolu are composed of pure fighting movements that have been subsequently conditioned by cultural practice or that they are cultural practices that happen to also be useful for combat training. Exclusive emphasis on either stance jettisons valuable information and the lived experiences of practitioners and risks explaining *away*, rather than *explaining*, the complex phenomenon of taolu.

Now, on to credibility, which asks: 'Was it performed in a way I respond to?' Attempts to parse what makes a performance of any sort compelling can appear arbitrary, formalist or nebulous. And yet, we have all had the experience of finding a performance credible, even if

2 The word 'imaginal' is a neologism coined by scholar Henri Corbin to describe the visualized and visionary experiences of Islamic mysticism that exist between sensory experience and discursive thought [Corbin 1977: viii-ix].

we each find it credible for different reasons or come to find it credible in different ways.

In 2011, I performed a taolu at the First International Hong Junsheng Taijiquan Seminar and Competition on Daqingshan in Shandong, China. I was surprised and pleased to receive a score of 8.6/10 – a gold medal – for my efforts. My teacher Chen Zhonghua later explained to me that, although this was the highest score awarded to a foreigner in the entire competition, the parameters on which I had been evaluated were things like the depth of my horse-riding stance, my stability on one leg, my kick height, the clarity of the sound I made slapping my foot when kicking and the sharpness of my stops. The actual spatiotemporal parameters of taijiquan, he said, were unknown to the judges, so I hadn't been graded on them. The judges found my performance credible; my teacher less so.

My personal parameters for credibility were further challenged when I watched the *tui shou* athletes preparing to compete. Martial arts competitors in China appear to focus either on the presentation of taolu or on various kinds of standing grappling and kickboxing. Competitive tui shou is a grappling sport derived from the partner balance training exercises of taijiquan. Speaking to a few of the competitors, I learned that professional push-hands players in China pick two or three principal throws that they train intensively. Tui shou players rarely practice taolu, but in order to qualify for competition, they have to demonstrate one. Imagine my surprise when I observed that they were not able to perform taolu credibly at all. They forgot movements, got stuck in repetitive loops and ignored postural requirements. Encased in the structural demands of taolu, they entirely lost their predatory menace and feline grace. They could not transfer the powerful credibility they demonstrated in their wrestling to their taolu.

A strong attempt to structurally identify what we are actually responding to when we attribute credibility to a performance has been proposed by theatre director Eugenio Barba. Theatre specialists will doubtless already be familiar with Barba's ideas; as I mentioned earlier, Barba, emerging from the Great Reform, is the Italian born director of a Danish theatre company called Odin Teatret, an ensemble he founded in 1964 and with which he has directed 28 original performances. He's also published prolifically on theatre. In 1980, inspired by the rigorous training of such traditional Asian dance-theatre forms as Indian Kathakali, Japanese Noh, Indonesian Topeng and Chinese Jingju, all of which he had seen while on tour around the world, Barba gathered a group of master performers from different traditions for a month-long workshop where he asked them to demonstrate and teach one another the exercises that they had learned as children on the first day of their apprenticeships.

Viewing these different exercises, Barba felt that, even though the results of training varied from style to style, the performers all sought a similar goal. They used their trained physicality to create a way of moving that captured their audience's attention. Barba theorized that the principal goal of rigorous training was to cultivate the attribute of stage presence, or *pre-sense*, that which draws us to a performer's actions before we can attribute meaning to them. In Ruffini's terms, credibility is presence, which, according to Barba, precedes decipherability. Barba has named this level of the performer's practice Pre-Expressive Behaviour, which he describes in terms of four principles [Barba 1995: 9]:

1. *Principle of Balance* – Performers use positions and ways of movement that are precarious and require greater effort to maintain than those used in daily life. Because they have control of their balance, they can move in unexpected directions without signaling their intent. And, as they can change at any time, we watch them.
2. *Principle of Opposition* – Opposition can be spatial or temporal. Spatially, lines of tension divide the body and create potential energy. For example, in *ma bu*, the body above the waist stretches up and below the waist sinks down. Temporally, I can signal left and then move right, catching the audiences' attention with a trick – look over there / look over here!
3. *Principle of Consistent Inconsistency* – This refers to the internal coherence of the performer's choices. In the case of a codified system like Chinese theatre, the idiosyncrasies of the form apply to all its practitioners and recur thematically throughout its repertoire. In less strictly codified genres, such as cinema acting, clowning, physical theatre or contemporary dance, the performer's personal idiosyncrasies, contextualized for performance, become an expressive vocabulary.
4. *Principle of Equivalency* – Everyday actions are decomposed and restructured in order to make them more visible and visceral than they would be in daily life. To use a prosaic example: In everyday life, I'll take a sip of water with as little effort as possible. To make the fact that I'm drinking water meaningful for an audience, I'll decompose the action into discrete phases to make it more legible [Barba 1995: 34].

I have found these principles to be great pedagogical tools for actors, dancers and martial artists-in-training. Balance and opposition are as important to a beginning student assimilating postures and stepping patterns as they are to an intermediate student practicing fighting games with a partner. Personal and stylistic idiosyncrasies and the relationship between them, meanwhile, can be perceived quickly by examining consistent inconsistency; the principle of equivalence lets us

consider how everyday movement is transformed into martial prowess and vice versa. Despite their usefulness, however, in my experience, these principles don't help in understanding *why* some performers are more interesting to watch than others; rather, they answer help in understanding *how* performers have trained in order to be credible to audiences.

The difference between 'why' and 'how' is a key one for me. As an artist, I've found asking 'how' to be more practical than asking 'why'. *How* do I acquire a particular skill? *How* do I practice a particular method? *How* do I choose between different training methods? *How* do I express the fruition of my practice?

My ongoing question with respect to credibility has to do with causality: *How* is the immediately credible causality of two taijiquan players wrestling freely and spontaneously reflected in a set solo choreographic sequence? This transfer is germane to both the practice of taolu and to theatre practice, where actors and dancers need to repeat known sequences of movement and behaviour night after night all the while reliably retaining their credibility.

In a video clip available online³, we see my taiji brothers Brennan Toh and John Dahms practicing competitive tui shou. Brennan is really trying to trip and throw John and John is really trying to stop him. As John falls, Brennan's actions are credible in the most fundamental sense and the causality of the exchange is clear.

In the early 2000s, I began to develop exercises for actors and dancers using partner games from Choy Li Fut and taijiquan. My objective was to maintain the credible causality created by physical contact when not touching, going from the credibility of a concrete result on a partner to the more subjective credibility of indirect action across space via non-verbal and verbal communication.

Over time, I differentiated our games into two main categories: avoidance and entanglement. When players are touching, these are striking (where one avoids being hit) and grappling (where one welcomes becoming entangled), but as larger metaphors they embrace interpersonal actions both physical and social.

3

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rpwd62RTMJI&t=64s>



Figure 8: Author and actor Colleen Durham practicing an entanglement exercise. Photos by Laura Astwood.

In the spring of 2009, I was awarded a three-year Research/Creation Grant by the Canadian Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council. This grant offered artists working in the university system funding for practical artistic research. I used this grant to found my studio *Les Ateliers du corps*, which for the first three years was a small group of emerging artists who met for nine hours a week to learn the curriculum of performer training I had assembled. Each year in the spring, we spent four weeks working full-time prior to presenting a professional dance theatre performance as the outcome of that year's training and creation activities. The participants in *Les Ateliers du Corps* learned Chen style taijiquan, both from me and from Chen Zhonghua on his regular visits to Ottawa. I had a chance to see the effect of training in both orthodox Chen style and the kinds of games I'd been developing myself.

These games initially lent themselves to creating interesting staging and choreography. The next clip⁴ is a fragment from *Nor the Cavaliers Who Come with Us* – an original performance about the conquest of Mexico that I created and directed in residence at the National Theatre School of Canada. Here, improvised partner entanglement about a single wooden staff is used to dramatize the many battles led by Conquistador Hernan Cortez as he fought his way from the coast to the Mexica capital, Tenochtitlan. The text he is speaking is a translation of the *Spanish Requirement of 1513*, or *Requirement*, a declaration by the Spanish monarchy of Spain's divinely ordained right to take possession of the territories of the New World and to subjugate, exploit and, when necessary, to fight the native inhabitants. The *Requirement* was read in Spanish to Native Americans to inform them of Spain's right of conquest. Those who subsequently resisted conquest were considered to harbor evil intentions. We took the title of the performance itself from this text.

The effect I had hoped to create by not actually setting the individual movements of the fight over the staff was the kind of spontaneity and precision shown by the students at the National Academy of Chinese Theatre Arts (NACTA) in Beijing⁵. They are using set fragments of known attacks and ripostes to improvise and mutually decide in the moment on the content and conclusion of their encounter.

This next fragment is from *Circe*⁶, a performance I created at the 2010 Canada Dance Festival, which is a national festival that takes place in Ottawa every spring. In this example, two performers set the results of their improvised entanglement game in order to create a

duet. The performance is named *Circe/Landfall* and it was based on the myth of Circe from Homer's *Odyssey*. Instead of Odysseus' men being transformed into pigs by Circe the witch, in our version, a single hallucinating, shipwrecked stranger is discovered washed up on the beach by a lonely woman. In this example, our Circe talks to herself and her conflicting inner voices played by two performers.

CONCLUSION

My combined experiences of training and teaching martial arts and theatre leads me to conclude provisionally that credibility in taolu is a function of interactivity. When we interact with a parameter, be it another person, a cultural enactment such as a theatrical figure or religious narrative or a series of impersonal movement variables, our focus is on something outside of ourselves. This gives us the space we need to interact with the multiple variables taolu conjure.

When we perform and watch taolu, we privilege different kinds of interactivity; we might expect taolu to be credible in terms of our existing repertoire of fighting techniques and power generation methods. But there are always techniques and methods of which we are ignorant. We can examine the credibility of taolu with respect to cultural information or with respect to our knowledge of fundamental human movement. But here, too, there will be gaps in our knowledge. Both taolu and the perceptual apparatus with which we receive them are palimpsestic. To the extent that we interact with different, tacit world-spaces, so the various world-spaces of the taolu become available to our perceptions.

Questions that might allow our attributions of credibility to become more conscious and nuanced would then include: What does the taolu suggest we should interact with? How does it accomplish this? How is the player interpreting those suggestions? We won't necessarily get exhaustive answers, but we will come closer to understanding our own parameters and the gaps in our experience.

Acknowledgement

I'd like to thank my teachers, colleagues, collaborators and students – their contributions have been decisive to this presentation. I'd also like to thank Debbie Shayne and Ted Mancuso of Plum Publications for their help in tracking down a few obscure books and dates: It's good to have good friends.

4 <https://vimeo.com/17352485> [25:55-27:30]

5 <https://vimeo.com/195117970>

6 <https://vimeo.com/15460624> [32:57-35:44]

REFERENCES

- Barba, Eugenio. 1994. *The Paper Canoe*. London: Routledge.
- Corbin, Henry. 1977. *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth*, translated by Nancy Pearson. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Holcombe, Charles. 1990. 'Theatre of Combat'. *The Historian*. 52: 3, 411-431. Blackwell: Hoboken.
- Hong, Junsheng. 2006. *Chen Style Taijiquan Practical Method – Volume One: Theory*, translated by Chen Zhonghua. Edmonton: Hunyuantaiji Press.
- Kang, Ge Wu. 1995. *The Spring and Autumn of Chinese Martial Arts*. Santa Cruz: Plum.
- Morris, Steve. 2003. 'Pedigree', available at: <http://www.oocities.org/vythe/stevemorris.html>
- Riley, Jo. 1997. *Chinese Theatre and the Actor in Performance*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ruffini, Franco. 2014. *Theatre and Boxing: The Actor Who Flies*, translated by Paul Warrington. Denmark: Icarus.
- Schino, Mirella. 2009. *Alchemists of the Stage*, translated by Paul Warrington. Denmark: Icarus.
- Wan, Lai Sheng. 1927. *Wushu Hui Zun*. Taipei: Lion Books.
- Zhou, Baofu. 2014. *Hall of Gongfu*. Video. Self-Produced. Kungfu Loung. Taipei.

MARTIALARTSSTUDIES.ORG

TWITTER.COM/MASTUDIES

MARTIAL ARTS STUDIES

EDITORS

Paul Bowman
Benjamin N. Judkins

EDITORIAL ASSISTANT

Kyle Barrowman

To discuss publication or to submit
a paper please contact:

martial.arts.studies@gmail.com

EDITORIAL ADVISORY PANEL

Oleg Benesch *University of York*
Stephen Chan *SOAS*
Greg Downey *Macquarie University*
D.S. Farrer *University of Guam*
Adam Frank *University of Central Arkansas*
Thomas A. Green *Texas A&M University*
T. J. Hinrichs *Cornell University*
Leon Hunt *Brunel University London*
Felipe P. Jocano Jr *University of the Philippines*
Gina Marchetti *Hong Kong University*
Meaghan Morris *The University of Sydney*
Daniel Mroz *University of Ottawa*
Meir Shahrar *Tel Aviv University*
Dale Spencer *Carleton University*
Douglas Wile *Alverno College*
Phillip Zarrilli *Exeter University, Emeritus*



ABOUT THE JOURNAL

Martial Arts Studies is an open access journal, which means that all content is available without charge to the user or his/her institution. You are allowed to read, download, copy, distribute, print, search, or link to the full texts of the articles in this journal without asking prior permission from either the publisher or the author.



The journal is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.

Original copyright remains with the contributing author and a citation should be made when the article is quoted, used or referred to in another work.



Cardiff University Press
Gwasg Prifysgol Caerdydd

Martial Arts Studies is an imprint of Cardiff University Press, an innovative open-access publisher of academic research, where 'open-access' means free for both readers and writers.
cardiffuniversitypress.org

Journal DOI

10.18573/ISSN.2057-5696

Issue DOI

10.18573/n.2017.10091